

Feature Article

Affirmative action in Israel: Access to academia for the ultra-orthodox community

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Background/Aim: This article explores the development of a unique, culturally sensitive, designated academic occupational therapy programme for the Ultra-Orthodox (Haredi) minority in Israel. This normative university environment did not provide the opportunity for Haredi participation due to the lack of consideration of the strong commitment to a modest way of life of this community. This prevented their participation in academia and resultant employment that are necessary for economic advancement of the community.

Method: A follow-up survey that tracked the programme's graduates' participation in the workforce was used to determine the success of the initial goal of the establishment of the designated programme.

Results: Slightly above 97% of the respondents worked as occupational therapists during the first year after completing their bachelor's degree. The employment data obtained from the graduates showed that the central goal of the Council of Higher Education has been achieved. The designated culturally adapted occupational therapy programme has provided varied employment opportunities for its graduates in diverse professional environments.

Conclusion: With the implementation of this programme, the occupational therapy department of the University of Haifa has created greater accessibility of the profession to both the occupational therapy providers and the recipients of occupational therapy intervention as well as serve as a model for other communities.

KEY WORDS academic occupational therapy programme, cultural sensitivity, ultra-orthodox (Haredi) community.

Introduction

In Israel, the basic premise that underlies the affirmative action strategy differs in its essence to that of the historical application of the term. Affirmative action was an American government agenda that was initiated in the 1960s to counteract historic discrimination faced by minority groups. Affirmative action programmes in education, employment and government sectors established criteria, which were different from the prevailing norm, and would enable the inclusion of minority groups into these sectors. The actual phrase 'affirmative action' was first used in President John F. Kennedy's 1961 Executive Order 10925, which required federal contractors to 'take affirmative action to ensure that applicants are employed, and that employees are treated during employment, without regard to their race, creed, colour, or national origin' (Sykes, 1995).

In Israel, the last decade has witnessed a marked increase in affirmative action programmes, specifically focusing on the accessibility of higher education for the Ultra-Orthodox (Haredi) minority of Israel. Unlike the historical process in the United States, it should be noted that it is not established public policies that have denied the opportunity for the Haredi community to participate in higher academic opportunities and subsequent employment placement. Rather, the institutions were not set up to accommodate the Haredi way of life which has restricted their participation in the public sphere (Caplan, 2003; Dahan, 2004). Thus, the affirmative action programme that was developed is a proactive initiative to increase Haredi participation in academia and employment and not as a response to discrimination.

Additionally, one of the major tenets of occupational therapy is that participation, the involvement in life situations, as defined by the International Classification of Disability and Function (ICF) (World Health Organization, 2001) is a basic construct of the philosophical and

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practical foundation of the profession. Furthermore, participation is facilitated or constrained by environmental factors (Hemmingsson & Jonsson, 2005; Law, 2002).

It is these concepts that have provided the basic rationale for the development of a designated occupational therapy baccalaureate programme for the Haredi community. The unique way of life of the Haredi community had prevented its participation in the normative university experience and the subsequent employment opportunities that are necessary for economic advancement of the community. By tailoring an academic programme to the needs of the sector, the occupational therapy department of the University of Haifa has not only created accessibility of the profession to a greater number of both providers and recipients of occupational therapy intervention within Haredi community but also fostered greater economic independence by increasing employment opportunities for the occupational therapy graduates in the general workforce.

Affirmative action policy implementation in Israel

The initial philosophical basis for the affirmative action programme was the creation of proactive strategies. These strategies allowed for legal incentives to encourage the incorporation of minorities into the education and employment arenas, despite that they did not necessarily meet acceptance criteria previously required. This same concept of creating proactive programmes, in the field of higher education, tailored to the Haredi community was the model used to solve the growing problem of unemployment and poverty in this sector. The Haredi requirement of separate gender educational programmes, a sensitivity to modesty throughout the academic process and a focus on pragmatic employable skills rather than general academic enrichment are but a few of the issues that needed to be addressed in the development of designated academic programmes accommodating this population (Dahan & Aviram, 2010).

On July 27, 1999, the Israeli Council for Higher Education made a policy decision to pursue the academisation process for the Haredi community. Four years later, the Council and its Planning and Budgeting Committee created an infrastructure in which the universities would run duplicates of their recognised baccalaureate programmes in two existing scholastic Haredi frameworks: The Haredi College of Bnei Brak (Mivchar College) and the Haredi College of Jerusalem.

Following this policy decision, the establishment of designated academic programmes progressed quickly. In the academic year 2005–2006, 375 Haredi students participated in these new programmes. By 2009, six higher education institutions had developed academic programmes for the Haredi community, with significant increases in the government budgets allocated for these designated academic programmes. In three years, the

general Haredi student body numbered 1596 (Dahan & Aviram, 2010).

Initially, 10% of these students were enrolled in the newly established occupational therapy programme of the University of Haifa located in Mivchar College, Bnei Brak.

Demographics of the Haredi community

The Haredi community, according to the Central Bureau of Statistics in Israel (Cohen-Dror, 2009), comprises approximately 8% of the Israeli population. Haredi families are three times more likely to live in poverty than non-Haredi Israeli households. In 36% of Haredi families, there is no wage earner, although the head of the family is of employable age. A significant number of Haredi men devote their life to religious studies. Eighty-three percent of these families live below the poverty line. Forty-three percent of Haredi families have one wage earner. Generally, the women of these households are employed part-time with relatively low income leaving a third of these households living below the poverty level (Gottlieb & Kasir, 2004).

Other exacerbating factors include the fact that the educational system in the Haredi community does not provide the sufficient basic educational skills needed for integration into the work force. Additionally, the most common occupation for Haredi women, who are the sole wage earners in the majority of households, is in education. However, the growth of jobs in this sector does not match the number seeking employment in this field (Cohanai, 2004). Moreover, the average birth rate among Haredi women has increased from six births in the beginning of the 1980s to 7.5 births in the 1990s. It is estimated that in the year 2025, the Haredi population in Israel will reach 1 million, with a relatively smaller number of wage earners compared to the general population (Avnimelech & Tamir, 2002).

These factors contributed to recognition by government institutions and the leaders of the Haredi community of the need to find the appropriate avenue to facilitate access to higher education for the Haredi community (Lupo, 2003).

Description of the Haredi academic programme and its accommodations

This is the ninth year since the inception of the occupational therapy Mivchar Program of the University of Haifa. There are currently four concurrent classes with a total of 140 female students enrolled in the off-campus programme in Bnei Brak. The requirements for admission are consistent with the university standards of threshold high school matriculation grades or grades from a recognised university preparatory course, psychometric exam and a written and oral interview prior to acceptance. The three-and-a-half year academic programme in Bnei Brak matches the University of Haifa campus programmes, and consists of more than

60 medical, social sciences and occupational theory and practice courses. All course curricula include the same content as the parallel course on the Haifa University campus. Additionally, each student is required to participate in 1000 hours of field work experience as required by the World Federation of Occupational Therapy (Hocking & Ness, 2002). Student field placements are in many of the same settings as those of the Haifa University campus students. Preparation in all areas (clinical and academic) focus on the student's ability to provide occupational therapy services to the full spectrum of the Israeli population.

Cultural accommodations to tailor the university environment and experience to the requirements of the Haredi community are diverse. Cultural sensitivity means being aware that cultural differences and similarities exist and have an effect on values, learning and behaviour (Stafford, Bowman, Ewing, Hanna & Lopez-De Fede, 1997). Cultural sensitivity is considered a feature of the holistic approach, which is a core concept of occupational therapy. Moreover, in occupational science, occupations are defined as the study of human occupations, their daily activities that have personal and/or cultural meaning, asking what determines whether occupations are valued economically or socially (Finlay, 1997; Kelly, 1995; Townsend & Polatajko, 2007; Yerxa, 1990). In line with that view, numerous accommodations have been implemented. An off-campus academic programme requires both infrastructure and resources that are readily available on the university campus. Technical constraints, including the limited library resources, have been a constant challenge for both faculty and students. Computer laboratories have been expanded on the off-campus locations, because a significant number of Haredi households do not have computer and/or internet access at home. The accessibility of information through internet search engines, which is a basic requirement for any academic programme, have been balanced with the requirement to filter internet sites that were deemed to have inappropriate content to maintain the strict standards of modesty that are required by the Haredi community. Protective technology has been implemented in the Bnei Brak campus library which allows for the full selection of library materials, whereas maintaining an appropriate environment for the advancement of knowledge.

Furthermore, the academic calendar is modified yearly to accommodate the Jewish holidays and Haredi observant religious lifestyle without compromising the accepted standards of practice. Additional vacation and shorter study days are scheduled before the Passover holiday, days of fast and during Chanukah. The length of the semester is adjusted, and make-up classes are scheduled so that teaching hours are not sacrificed.

To establish an appropriate learning environment for the Haredi students, all programme are gender-segregated. In Mivchar College, Bnei Brak, day classes are designated for women ending at 5 p.m. Evening

classes for the men start at 5:30 p.m., thus maximising the use of the infrastructure and investment in the institution. A dress code acceptable to the faculty and respectful of the Haredi sensitivities was established. All faculty members come from mainstream academic and clinical setting. The faculty has encountered certain challenges during the acclimatisation period and their development of cultural sensitivity and competency. Teaching materials including films are carefully reviewed to assure modesty of dress, language and content before use in the classroom.

Law (2002) wrote:

Occupational therapy, at its best, focuses on occupations important to each person within his or her environment... The relationship among that person, his or her family, and the occupational therapist is a collaborative partnership, the goal of which is to enhance health and wellbeing through participation.

The importance of adapting the learning experience (the student's occupation) to the cultural context and needs of the student body has enabled the students to flourish in a friendly and supportive learning environment, and has facilitated their successful completion of the programme and achievement of the collective goals of employment, as well as their own personal goals.

Two third-year courses emphasise the application of this concept. In the course 'Administration of Occupational Therapy Services in Israel', the students are given an assignment to write a proposal for the introduction or expansion of occupational therapy services in an existing non-profit, non-governmental organisation (NGO). The rationale for the assignment was based on the known abundance of NGOs involved in social action and community service, and the high rate of volunteerism in the Haredi community.

Students study various organisations, choose an appropriate candidate and describe the benefits the organisation would derive from the addition of an occupational therapy programme. In a second course, the basic concepts of accessibility for people with disabilities are taught and applied to both the private sector and the areas of public domain. Included in the discussion of the applicable laws are venues most relevant to Haredi students, including the key religious institutions of the synagogue and the ritual bath (mikve).

Both of these examples exhibit the beneficial use of the cultural context in the process of acquiring cultural sensitivity and competency of the occupational therapy faculty, thus facilitating the learning environment for the student. The combination of understanding and respecting societal norms, whereas simultaneously introducing new approaches is necessary for the occupational therapist to successfully treat culturally differ-

ent clients (Awaad, 2003). It is this parallel paradigm that is central to the success of a designated, culture-specific occupational therapy programme.

The way that the ultimate success of this designated occupational therapy academic programme was determined was to track the programme’s graduates and their subsequent participation in the workforce.

Method

Participants

A total of 91 women graduates of the first three graduating classes were invited through e-mail or telephone, to take part in the survey. Eighty-seven responded to the questionnaire which constitutes a 96% response.

Instruments

A survey questionnaire was developed by the head of the academic programme and by the academic coordinator of the Occupational Therapy Department (Mivchar Program). The purpose of the questionnaire was to assess the work status during the year following graduation and licensing. The survey included demographic questions such as: marital status, children and residence, employment status, specialty area, weekly work hours and work preferences. Qualitative data were not collected for this study.

Procedure

Permission to conduct the current survey was authorised by the ethical committee of the Faculty of Social Welfare & Health Sciences of the University of Haifa (protocol no. 174/12). The data were collected via an online questionnaire and a phone survey.

Data analysis

The statistical tests included descriptive statistics of chi-squared tests and Pearson correlations, regarding incidence and scope of working hours, and specialty areas, which were carried out using IBM Statistical Package for Social Sciences (IBM SPSS, version 17.0).

Results

As evident in Figure 1, slightly above 97% of the respondents worked as occupational therapists during the first year after completing their bachelor’s degree. More than two-thirds of the respondents worked at least half-time, which is typical for employment in the occupational therapy field in Israel. Seventy-seven percent of the graduates were married. Slightly more than a third of this group did not have children, almost half of the group had one or two children and there was one graduate with nine children.

The majority of the graduates (72.4%) worked in paediatric occupational therapy, the rest significantly smaller

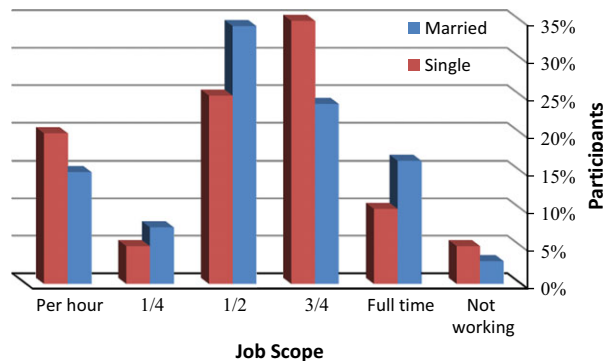


FIGURE 1: Job scope. This figure shows that 35% of the unmarried graduates work 3/4 time whereas 34% of the married graduates hold half-time positions.

percentage of therapists are working with populations with physical disabilities, psycho-social disabilities and geriatrics (Fig. 2). Thirty-five of 91 (38%) participants answered the question specifying if the employment setting specifically catered to the Haredi community (for example, Haredi schools or senior centres) or served the general population in Israel. Although, only partial information describing employment setting was collected, it was evident that 19 (54%) of those who responded worked specifically in the Haredi community and 16 (45%) respondents worked in mainstream settings catering to all sectors of Israeli society.

Further examination of the participants in this study, using Pearson correlation, showed no significant correlation between the number of weekly hours worked (job scope) and the number of children in the Haredi family ($r = -.024, n = 84, P > 0.05$ N.S).

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore the development of a unique culturally sensitive, designated academic therapy programme, for the Ultra-Orthodox (Haredi) minority in Israel. As is apparent from the employment data obtained from the graduates, the central goal of the Council of Higher Education has been

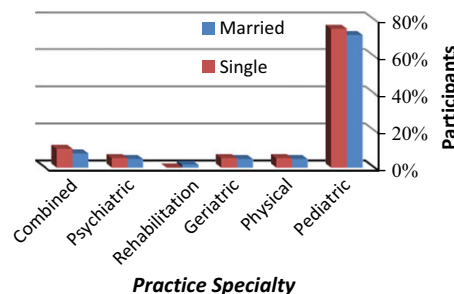


FIGURE 2: Practice specialty. This figure shows that more than 70% of the graduates work in occupational therapy settings with the paediatric population.

achieved. The designated culturally adapted occupational therapy programme has provided varied employment opportunities for its graduates in diverse professional environments.

Currently, the designated Haredi academic programmes include introductory and advanced courses in psychology, sociology and health education which affords a broad knowledge base that relates directly to the family and community functioning. The students studying in these academic settings will impact the Haredi family and community as a result of the exposure to areas of studies which are not included in the Haredi schools' curriculum. The programmes focusing on social welfare and health sciences will likely increase the awareness for intervention in the Haredi community, when needed. Moreover, the Haredi community will have the ability to meet this need, as more Haredi graduates enter a workforce that caters to their own community. It should be noted that in addition to employment in work practise settings solely serving the Haredi community such as schools and senior centres, the Haredi graduates are also employed in the general mainstream work settings. The high number of married women working as occupational therapists is in keeping with the high percentage of married Haredi women participating in the general workforce as reported by Cohanai (2004). Moreover, the number of children in the Haredi family as was reflected by the participants of this study did not seem to have an impact on job scope. Namely, the number of children did not correlate with the mother's working hours, and did not restrict her from fully participating in the workforce. Additionally, the newly employed graduates increased the family income, thereby contributing to the attainment of financial stability for the Haredi family (Heller, 2002).

Limitations and future research

The data that were collected were from the designated academic occupational therapy programme for the Haredi community in Israel and did not include the other designated academic programmes. Follow-up for these other academic programmes in both the Haredi scholastic institutions (Bnei Brak and Jerusalem) would provide a broader scope of the impact of academic studies on this sector. Continued examination of the subsequent graduates of the designated occupational therapy programme should be examined to ensure the consistency of the findings and conclusions.

A research study examining the integration of the occupational therapy graduates of the designated Haredi programme into the mainstream employment arena is being considered. Employee evaluations and feedback from the graduates about their professional preparedness for mainstream work settings would be the focus of this study.

Informal student feedback and input from the Haredi community leaders has resulted in constant fine tuning

of the academic programmes. Formal documentation and study of this process would result in better implementation of the different existing programmes and the development of new designated academic programmes. A comparison of the long-term follow-up of job satisfaction of the different professions could provide valuable information for future academic planning. Additionally, the study of the implications of academisation on the general Haredi community should be further explored by a qualitative study or mixed method study.

Conclusion and future implications

The accessibility of academic studies now available to the Haredi community in general, and the designated occupational therapy programme, in particular, has made an impact on two distinct levels. At the macro level, it is expected that there will be many long- and short-term positive implications due of the establishment of these designated academic programmes. The ripple effect will be difficult to quantify, but it can be conjectured that an effect will be noticeable in the community as more and more students complete their academic studies in the ever increasing number academic programmes available to the Haredi community.

The increased employment opportunities for the graduates are only one aspect of the benefits. The academic standard of the elementary and secondary education in the Haredi school system is expected to improve, including relevant preparation for matriculation examinations that will facilitate admissions into these academic programmes. A secondary gain would also be achieved for those students who chose not to pursue a university degree, as they will complete their high schools studies with a more valuable foundation in core subjects.

At the micro level, there are two distinct spheres affected by the introduction of occupational therapy academic programmes to the Haredi community: (i) increase in employment opportunities for graduates of the programme; and (ii) introduction of qualified Haredi occupational therapists who meet the special characteristics of the community within the educational, health and welfare settings specifically catering to this population. It should be noted that the qualified occupational therapy graduates of this designated programme do not work solely within the Haredi community but also have been integrated in various general workplaces across Israel. Their ability to successfully integrate in the general workplaces could be due to the fact that the student field placements are in diverse general settings, allowing mutual familiarisation.

In conclusion, the creation of culturally sensitive, designated academic programmes has simultaneously afforded new opportunities for the programmes' graduates, their families and the Haredi community. The success of this programme can encourage similar academic programmes in various places around the world, where

academic studies for minority populations are inaccessible for cultural, social and religious reasons. Creating designated academic programmes for minority populations can promote economic growth and new opportunities for the entire community.

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